



# BULLETIN

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## Post-Election Crisis as a Warning for Afghanistan and NATO

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*Although the presidential election in Afghanistan did not meet democratic standards, a government of national unity was finally created and the threat of an armed power-struggle was avoided. However, the post-election political crisis should be a warning that there is still a real risk of renewed and full-scale ethnic conflict. Therefore, part of NATO's new mission should be to help Afghanistan create stable security and power structures based on Afghan realities.*

**Elections and Political Crisis.** According to an agreement signed on September 21, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, former minister of finance and close ally of the outgoing president, Hamid Karzai, will be the new president of Afghanistan. His rival, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, former head of diplomacy, negotiated to fill the new position of “chief of the executive” (temporary prime minister). The agreement is a consequence of a political crisis, which escalated after two rounds of the presidential election in April and June. In the first round, Ghani (Pashtun) received 31.5% of votes, while Abdullah (half-Pashtun, half-Tajik) won 45%. Since neither garnered the majority required to win outright, there was a need for a run-off. Preliminary results from the second round indicated victory for Ghani with 56.4% of votes, while Abdullah got 43.5%.

Almost 3,000 complaints, and Abdullah's claims of fraud relating to two million (out of eight million votes), resulted in serious crisis. Under pressure from the U.S., Abdullah abandoned threats to form an “alternative government” and agreed on talks with Ghani about a new government of national unity. Both also agreed that votes from 23,000 ballot boxes would be audited, and that they would recognise the final results. The audit has inflamed emotions further, and was marred by complaints from both sides. When the compromise on power-sharing was finally reached, both candidates agreed that the Independent Election Commission should not immediately publish information about real levels of support and the scale of election fraud. According to final results announced during the inauguration of the new president on 29 September, Ghani received 55% of votes.

**Impact on Internal Politics.** The election ends Karzai's long and controversial presidency. Although agreement on the unity government does not meet democratic standards, it is a first case of democratic power transfer in Afghanistan. However, the political crisis has raised concerns about the future of Afghanistan after 2014. The prolonged dispute has apparently deepened ethnic divisions among the major ethnic groups living in Afghanistan (Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara). The negotiated power-sharing deal and the lack of transparent results might also undermine Afghans' fragile confidence in the election and the state institutions.

The existence of two de facto centres of power may also increase the risk of permanent political crisis, which will paralyse the government and administration. To avoid this scenario and provide legitimacy to the state, politicians will have to introduce constitutional reforms, which will embed the new post of prime minister into the power structure and clearly define the competences of power centres. The new government will also need to demonstrate commitment to other reforms, with the fight against corruption at the forefront. It should enhance administration in rural areas, where 75% of Afghanistan's population lives, especially in Pashtun dominated regions that are traditionally the main reservoir of cadres for the insurgency. Without such moves it will be difficult to regain the support of the Afghans and to run an effective campaign against the Taliban and their propaganda.

At the same time, division of competences between the Pashtun president and Tajik prime minister may better reflect existing ethnic divisions in Afghanistan. This might influence the strength and loyalty of the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF), which, even with the increased number of Pashtuns among the foot soldiers, are still dominated by Tajik officers. The government of national unity might also increase chances for reconciliation with some moderate factions of the Taliban, opening the way for stabilisation of the country.

**Impact on Foreign Policy.** It is in the strategic interest of Afghanistan to maintain the Western commitment to the country's stability, sovereignty and economic development. The end of political deadlock and the appointment of a new president open the way for a reset in Afghanistan-U.S. relations, which were strained almost to breaking point by Karzai's public criticism of American policy in Afghanistan. He also refused to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement with the United States, which regulates the status of American forces after 2014 and is a condition for NATO's new "Resolute Support" mission. Signing this agreement will be one of first decisions of the new president in his foreign policy.

The new government in Kabul might also use Abdullah's connections with India, Iran and Russia for closer regional cooperation in economic development and fighting common threats, from Islamic extremism to drug trafficking. However, stability will be hard to achieve without improved relations with Pakistan, which is accused by Kabul and Washington of supporting the Afghan Taliban. Chances for building common confidence might be limited by Islamabad's strategic calculations, for Pakistan's interests lie in maintaining influence over its neighbour and preventing an Afghan-Indian alliance, which could lead to strategic encirclement of Pakistan. The new government in Kabul is likely to use the issue of the Afghan-Pakistani border (the Durand Line), which is not recognised by Kabul, as a bargaining chip in relations with Islamabad. Another issue in bilateral relations, and a tool that might give Afghanistan additional leverage, could be alleged Afghan support for Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an extremist movement fighting the Pakistani state.

**New NATO Mission and Post-2014 Security.** The presidential election in 2014 was supposed to be a final test for the administration and ANSF before the pull out of U.S. and ISAF forces and final handover of responsibility to Afghans. By the end of 2014, the U.S. and the ISAF will have pulled out the majority of troops, which numbered 140,000 at the peak. They will be replaced by the 12,500 soldiers participating in a new mission, focused on assisting and mentoring the ANSF. According to President Barack Obama, the U.S. will contribute up to 9,800 troops initially, but this number will be cut by half by the end of 2015. After 2016, the U.S. presence will be lowered to 1,000, with the priority of securing the U.S. embassy in Kabul and supervising defence cooperation. At the same time, the United States and NATO have declared financial support for the ANSF until 2017. The cost of maintaining the 352,000-strong forces is estimated at \$6-7 billion, but Western commitments have so far reached only \$3.5 billion. The promises of economic support for Afghanistan for the next decade also look uncertain.

Despite its undemocratic character, the power-sharing agreement represents the first peaceful transfer of power in Afghanistan's history. The unity government offers prospects of some stability at a time when Afghanistan will receive substantially lower support from the international community. However, NATO will have to take advantage of its new mission, to advance the constitutional reforms necessary for the future stability of the country. Continued unconstitutional power-sharing can not only inflame the tensions in Afghan society, but can also be perceived by a number of international donor countries as undemocratic, creating a pretext for not keeping promises of financial assistance to Afghanistan.

NATO will also have to demonstrate renewed commitment to the stability of the ANSF. It seems likely that the Taliban will try to test the Afghan security forces after the withdrawal of ISAF and U.S. troops in 2014. The number of attacks could increase drastically in the 2015 spring-summer combat season. This could be a challenge for the ANSF, which will suffer from gaps in capabilities such as signal intelligence, reconnaissance, close air support, artillery support and medical evacuation (MEDEVAC). Together with lack of financing and continuing political crises, the fragile stability of the state could be put to a serious test.

Irrespective of these threats, the U.S. will push forward with the complete withdrawal of its forces before the next American presidential election in 2016. The top U.S. priority in Afghanistan remains the neutralisation of Al Qaeda and preventing attacks against American territory. At the same time, Obama is committed to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan and achieve common security goals, with the ANSF supported by the new NATO "Resolute Support" mission. The United States will maintain the capability for a quick deployment of substantial forces in the event of strategic threats of central government collapse, risk of Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict, or the possibility of extremists taking over Pakistani nuclear weapons. Since Afghanistan will rely on the support of NATO, it should be expected that, if the situation deteriorates, the U.S. will expect increased commitment to Afghanistan from the allies.

As Poland consistently builds its position as a reliable NATO member and regional ally of the United States, it is in Polish interests to maintain a military and civilian presence in Afghanistan with a contribution to the "Resolute Support" mission. The Polish contribution should include the mentors and trainers, including special forces training for elite ANSF units. An effective NATO mission in Afghanistan can enhance the value of the alliance in overall U.S. strategy, and provide an argument for renewed U.S. commitment to European security in a time of tensions stoked by a resurgent Russia.